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SUBJECT: CNS LEADERS LOOK TO THE STARS FOR HOPE AND GOOD LUCK

¶1. Leaders of the Council for National Security (CNS) visited famed Chiang Mai astrologer Varin Buaviratlert April 1, suggesting that it takes more than military might and political righteousness to govern Thailand's increasingly chaotic affairs of state. Attraction to mediums and mystics cuts across all segments of Thai society, as evidenced by the loyalty of one of Varin's most famous followers, CNS leader Gen Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, a devout Muslim.

¶2. Senior RTG military leaders, including CNS General Secretary Winai Phattiyakul, visited Varin last week for a ceremony to protect against ill fortune and pay respect to their mentor. According to media reports, those also present included CNS Vice Chairman Chalit Phukphasuk and Gen Sonthi's wife, Piyada Boonyaratkalin. Sonthi and other CNS leaders last publicly visited Varin in early November to ward off bad luck that might have stemmed from their staging of the Sept. 19 coup.

¶3. A close business contact of Varin's told ConGen staff that Gen Sonthi has sought Varin's advice for more than 10 years, ever since the seer foretold of a coveted military promotion Sonthi received. Other CNS members similarly depended on Varin's guidance long before they helped oust the former government. Many see Varin as serving as an unofficial special advisor to the CNS, claiming he has provided recommendations on everything from the precise timing for staging the coup to political appointments in the new government.

¶4. A Chiang Mai native, Varin was a rural teacher and failed real estate investor before making the leap to all-knowing astrologer 20 years ago. Prior to finding fame as the CNS's favorite soothsayer, he struck it rich by convincing his clients to include him as a partner in their business investments. The media coverage of his services to CNS leaders has driven demand for his services even higher. But even before the coup, he had achieved notoriety, playing both sides of Thailand's political divide by also once counseling former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

¶5. Belief in astrology and mysticism is well within the mainstream of Thai culture, which blends astrology and a rich mixture of Buddhism, Hinduism, animism, and elements of the occult into everyday life and decision making. However, the devotion to Varin's wisdom expressed by some CNS officials combined with the cost of flying government leaders up to Chiang Mai in C-130 military planes, has raised eyebrows even among normally superstitious Thais.

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